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A DISCOURSE

ON THE

EVILS OF THE DANCE,

BY

REV. JESSE GUERNSEY.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

A

DISCOURSE

ON THE

EVILS OF THE DANCE,

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONG. CHURCH, DERBY, CONN.

DECEMBER TWENTY-SECOND, 1850.

BY

JESSE GUERNSEY,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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DISCOURSE.

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"And the end of that mirth is heaviness."

The evils connected with the amusement of the ball-room: this is my theme. It is no sooner announced than some of you are ready to meet me with the stereotyped question: "What harm is there in mere dancing?" Suppose I were to admit that there is none: what then? The truth is, there is no such thing as *mere* dancing! The advocates of this amusement when they talk of the innocence of "mere dancing;" or of the perfect propriety of "dancing in itself considered;" endeavor to meet the scruples and get around the objections of their opponents by raising a false issue. The question is not what it is "in itself considered," but what it is considered in the light of its tendencies and results. A given act, abstractly viewed, may appear ever so harmless; and if experience prove that evil is its leading and invariable consequence, it cannot be repeated without guilt. It is in

accordance with this principle, I apprehend, that we should make up our judgment of the character of the dance.

What then is the nature of the influence it exerts? What are the consequences by which it is followed? They are good or bad; to be desired or deprecated; which? You who indulge in, and defend it as innocent and proper, can you tell me of any good it has ever done? Can you tell me of any vice it has helped to overcome, or of any virtue it has served to strengthen? Can you point me to the man whose life is purer, whose intelligence is wider, whose character is nobler, whose usefulness is greater as the result of its influence? You look in vain for these things as consequent upon the mirth of those who gaily mingle in the dance.

The end of that mirth is not blessing; it is heaviness. This, I trust, will sufficiently appear as I proceed to speak of

The amusement of the ball-room, as ruinous in its influence upon those by whom it is shared.

If it does thus appear, if it is made evident that, while you can name no good as resulting from the dance, it is the source of vast mischief, then it seems to me that every right minded man here, every man who acknowledges allegience to good moral principle, must unite with me in condemning it as wrong, and in arraying against it all the force of his example and influence.

I. I will speak in the first place, of *its debasing effects upon the intellectual taste and character.*

In this particular, it differs widely, from most of the recreations commonly designated under the head of popular amusements.

When those of kindred sympathies, and kindred tastes, assemble beneath some hospitable roof to pass the hours of a winter's eve in free social cheer, the enjoyment with which those hours are filled, the present excitement which gives light to every eye, and freshness to every countenance, results not from the body's quick motion, but from the contact of mind with mind; from the kindling power of warm and living thought.

In the melodious, and to some ears almost heavenly utterances of music, in the voice of pure and exalted song, with the power to call together, and hold entranced admiring and wondering thousands, there is that which exerts upon man's intellectual as well as moral nature, a quickening and an upward tending influence.

From the worthy productions of the artist; from the canvass upon which the personages and scenes of other times are made to appear in ours; from the canvass upon which are copied landscape beauties, whose originals, none but a hand of infinite skill could produce; from the canvass upon which form and expression have been given to the most exalted conceptions of moral truth and beauty; from these sources of amusement, of late so widely and successfully employed, the observer may learn lessons which shall tend to purify, expand and ennoble his intellectual and spiritual nature.

The representations of the stage, corrupt as they fre-

quently are, corrupt as are those by whom they are made, and corrupting as is their influence, have at least this merit, they require mental activity, they communicate some just sentiments and stiring thoughts.

The game of chance, associated as it is with the vilest haunts of pollution and wickedness, unmingled as is the wretchedness by which it has been frequently followed, total as is the ruin it has often caused to character and estate, has the advantage of giving intellectual occupation and discipline. *

But in the dance there is nothing, absolutely nothing that serves to give nourishment and strength to the mind. It never suggested a great thought; it never gave to the human soul an impulse in the direction of greatness. No soul enkindling truth did it ever communicate, no glowing aspirations after knowledge did it ever inspire. I have yet to see the man, and I apprehend the world has yet to see the man, who will even pretend to believe that he is intellectually richer and nobler for having shared in the amusement of the ball-room.

Instead of enriching, it impoverishes; instead of ennobling, it belittles. It cannot be otherwise; for while it affords none but the most insignificant subjects of thought, such is its power of fascination, that

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* In this passage, the author has been charged, both publicly and privately, with affirming gambling to be preferable to the dance; but the reader will at once see that the comparison here, is between the game of chance *as an amusement* and dancing; and not at all between the employment of the gambling saloon, (which is no amusement) and the amusement of the ball-room. But even if the game of chance here *did* mean gambling, the comparison includes but a single particular, and hence, of course, could not be fairly interpreted as an expression of preference for it *on the whole*. As well might one who should say "idiocy has the advantage of intelligence *in respect to freedom from trouble and care*," be understood as saying that he would rather be a fool than possess the mental powers ordinarily granted to man.

it gains an almost exclusive possession of the minds of its votaries. They no sooner give themselves up to its influence, than it becomes the presiding genius of their souls. Little as there is in it to think of, they can think of nothing else.

So it will be with those who attend upon the course of lessons in dancing recently commenced in this community. They cannot mingle in the dance from week to week, without becoming so absorbed in it as to have little relish for aught but the dance. Their libraries, if they have them, will speedily lose their attraction; the scenes and experiences of the ball-room, or dancing hall, will monopolize their thoughts by day, and have a place in their nightly dreams; their conversation will mainly relate to the comparative merits of this partner, and of the other; to the taste displayed in one lady's dress, and to the want of it in that of her neighbor; to the graceful ease that marks this gentleman's movements, and to the awkwardness which characterizes those of his friend. These, and other themes of equal moment, will receive their constant and undivided attention! What inspiring subjects of thought! how expanding! how elevating in their influence upon the soul!

If devotion to the dance secures such an occupation of the mind; and I see not how it can be intelligently and truthfully denied, then surely, I need not say more in proof of its tendency to debase the intellectual taste and character. But this is among the least of the evils by which it is accompanied.

II. In the second place, I will speak of *its tendency to demorilization.*

It is found in such close proximity to the more

prominent of our social vices; it is so often made to subserve the vile purposes of those who live by fostering them, that nothing is hazarded, I am sure, in saying, that between it and them, there is a near and a natural relationship.

Go to the vilest haunt of pollution which the chief commercial city of our union affords; go where virtue is derided and scoffed at; go where the lowest lust is unbridled; where vice in its most degraded, disgusting form reigns triumphant; and amid all the signs of wretchedness and woe that surround you there, you will find the night-consuming dance. Why is it there? Whence its attractions for such miserable and shame-votaries of lust? You mistake if you suppose that among them it is out of its place. It is there for the same reason that the cup of intoxication is there; because it helps to satisfy the depraved tastes; to feed the accursed passions of the wretched beings by whom it is shared. Is this doubted?

If I might set before you here, all the secret thoughts that ere another week's commencement will have had their origin in connection with yonder ball-room; if I might read off to you here, all the low and jesting remarks that will be consequent upon the ball advertised to take place there, you would doubt no longer; you would ask for no more conclusive proof of the natural connection there is between the dance and that house which the wisdom of inspiration has declared to be the way to hell.

But if increased evidence were required, I might refer you to the generally vicious character of those who have made dancing, for the amusement of others, the business of their lives. Such is the public estimation of this class of persons, that in the absence of par-

ticular knowledge concerning any one who belongs to it, the presumption always is that he or she is a stranger to virtue.

It is hardly more evident, that the use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage, tends to make men drunkards, than that the amusement of the ball-room tends to licentiousness.

Let me not be misunderstood; of course, I do not mean that all who join in the dance are polluted, but only that it *tends* to this kind of impurity.

It tends also to another form of immorality more common than this, among us, namely, that of intemperance. The ball-room, and the bar-room are generally found together, and together they belong. Do you ask for the evidence on which this assertion is based? you shall have it.

The fact is worthy of notice in this connection, that the amusement of the ball-room, and the patronage of the bar-room, have to a considerable extent, been fashionable and unfashionable together. A few years ago, the dance had extensively grown into disuse; and such was the state of public sentiment respecting it, that you could rarely find a person of respectable standing in society, who would risk his respectability by attendance at a ball. Just then, too, a young man of character, would as soon have thought of cutting off his right hand, as of calling at a public house for aught that could intoxicate. Now, the dance is again becoming popular; the ball-room is again becoming the rallying place of gaiety and fashion: and now, too, (singular coincidence, is it not?) and now too, it is no uncommon thing for young men to be seen bowing at the shrine of Bacchus.

The coincidence is not so very remarkable after all,

if we but remember that the amusement of the ball-room, hardly ever fails to secure a flourishing business to the bar-keeper.

If, in a certain hotel, recently opened, not a hundred miles distant, there is a place, as has been more than suspected, where wine and brandy, and other articles of like nature are *not sold*, for that would be contrary to law, but quietly exchanged for money; does any one doubt that the exchanging process was more briskly carried on there, on a recent occasion, than it would have been, had there been no such thing as a cotillion party in the neighborhood?

I have lately seen somewhere, an advertisement of a ball to come off on the eve of Christmas day; the tickets to which are to be a certain price, "Refreshments included." "Refreshments included!" What sort of refreshments? Does any one doubt, that to a very great extent at least, they will be of that peculiar kind which no man in health was ever the better for receiving? Does any one doubt that they will be poisons, accursed poisons, under the name and in the guise of refreshments? An advertisement of a ball, ending with "Refreshments included," is to me, a sufficient assurance, that its author understands that a ball will create a demand for what is kept within the bar, and give him a fine opportunity to meet that demand without incurring the penalty of violated law. The result will doubtless show that he has rightly judged.

All precedent is in accordance with this judgment. In connection with that ball, as has been the case in thousands of others, some young man may take his first glass. Scores and scores of young men, and

among them some whom I, and probably some whom you have known, in their early years of hope and promise, have entered the ball-room, there to take their first lesson in the use of intoxicating drinks; there, for the first time perhaps, to violate the pledge of abstinence; there to enter upon that downward way which ends in a drunkard's grave: ends! no, never ends! but goes onward and downward through eternal ages.

If the dance tends thus to intemperance, it surely becomes such of its supporters as are numbered with the friends of the temperance cause, to inquire with all seriousness, whether they are not undoing in one direction what they are striving to do in another: whether they are not pulling down with one hand that which the other is busily employed in endeavoring to build up.

Thus much with reference to the tendency of the dance to demorilization.

III. I now pass to speak in the third place, of *its tendency to spiritual ruin.*

Indulgence in it cannot be combined with any considerable measure of spirituality on the part of the christian professor.

When is it, that he is persuaded, if at all, to join in the amusement of the ball-room? Is it when he enjoys most of the presence of God in his soul? is it when the voice of prayer is most frequent and most earnest in his closet? is it when his communion with the Savior is most intimate and precious? is it when his love to the souls of men is fullest and warmest? is it when he is most actively employed about his heavenly Father's business? is it when his desires af-

ter holiness are most influential and most cherished? No! not then. Then neither the dance nor the accompanying lightness and gayety have any attractions for him. It is only when he has wandered far from God: it is only when his spiritual vision has become so obscured that he no longer has an ever-present view of the realities of the future: it is only when the place of prayer has begun to lose its attracting power: it is only when the world has in a great measure resumed its sway in his soul: it is only when he has become immersed in the spirit of worldliness that he can even begin to think of enjoyment in the dance. It is then alone that his spiritual state, and the amusement of the ball-room, are at all consonant with each other.

The votaries of that amusement among the men of the world understand this. They no sooner see him beginning to mingle with them in the dance than they conclude that his interest in the things of religion is gone: that he has become essentially as one of them.

Let one of their number become anxious for the salvation of his soul, and he would no sooner think of going to *him* for counsel than to one of his companions who has never professed to have passed from death unto life. Let one of their number be called suddenly to look upon the face of approaching death, and it is not to him that he will send to come to his bedside and implore in his behalf, forgiving and sparing mercy.

How clearly and how impressively too, does this show that devotion to the dance is inconsistent with spiritual mindedness, and hence tends to spiritual ruin!

That such is its tendency is further evident from the fact that it constitutes an obstacle in the way of the

conversion of the sinner. Many a soul has been kept out of the kingdom of God, which might have been brought in, but for its influences. It so engrosses the mind, that it is with the utmost difficulty if at all, that its attention to the truths of Religion can be secured, that it is with the utmost difficulty that its votaries can be persuaded to turn their thoughts from it, to the consideration of their immortal interests.

It is on this account more than any other, that I regret the arrangements for the present season which are likely to bring so many of our youth under its influence. The people of God are praying I hope for the out-pouring of his spirit and the revival of his work. Whether there is a faith here adequate to call down so rich a blessing remains to be proved: but had the adversary known that God was about to get glory to himself here, in the salvation of souls; had he anticipated the presence here of God's convincing and renewing spirit, and as a consequence, a general turning unto the Lord, he could not have devised a plan for warding off from the young every saving influence, for closing their minds against every saving truth and motive, better adapted to its end, than the establishment of a school for dancing and the commencement of a series of cotillion parties and balls.

The spiritual, the eternal ruin of some may, and very likely will, be thus secured. Parents whose influence and authority might have kept their children away from the influence of the dance, but have failed to do so, may as a consequence be called to weep and mourn over their everlasting destruction.

In view of the intellectual, moral and spiritual evils consequent upon the dance, can it be said with any propriety to be an innocent amusement? Can mirth,

whose end may with such an emphasis, be characterized as "heaviness," mirth whose natural, and whose actual consequences are, starved and shrunken minds, degraded characters and ruined souls, can such mirth I say, be justified and indulged in, as appropriate and harmless?

In reply to this question, some among us would probably say, "We are willing to admit the evil tendencies of the dance as conducted in the ball-room, but is there good ground for condemning it as it is found in fashionable parties, assembled in private dwellings?"

In all sincerity and honesty, I must say, I think there is! I think there is, because, in the first place, many of the evil tendencies of which I have spoken, are as immediately connected with the dance at the fashionable party, as with the dance in the ball-room: (the intellectual and spiritual influence at least, are the same in kind if not in degree;) and because, in the next place, *dancing at the party, gives countenance to, and secures dancing in the ball-room.* Thus it becomes connected with and responsible for, all the evil consequent upon the dance in its most public and objectionable forms. The community in which it was a prominent amusement in connection with gay assemblages in private dwellings last season, need not be surprised if the gaities of the present season commence with cotillion parties and christmas balls, at places of public resort. The parents who think there is no harm in the dance as conducted at a private house, need not be surprised if their sons and daughters think there is no harm in it as conducted at the public house. The man who drinks wine or brandy at his own table, has

as much right to expect that his son will not call for wine or brandy at the hotel, as the man who dances at his neighbor's party, has that his children will not dance at the public ball.

For this reason, *if for no other*, I think the dance at the party as well as in the ball-room is worthy of condemnation.

There may be some in this community who have the hardihood to quote the authority of the Bible in support of the amusement whose tendencies to evil have been considered. To any of this number who may chance to be present, it is sufficient to reply that they do not themselves believe that the Author of the Bible honors the ball-room and the dance with his approving presence. Little as is their reverence for sacred things, they would be shocked at the blasphemy, should a dancing professor of religion propose to give God thanks for the privilege of mingling in the dance, and to pray that it might be made "a means" of good to those by whom it was about to be enjoyed. The only dancing which has the sanction of holy example, the only dancing of which the word of God speaks approvingly, was of the nature of a religious service; and of course, until the dancing of the present day shall have the same character, or at least *pretend* to have it, the authority of sacred writ cannot be made to contribute to and sanction its support.

The truth is, and there is no denying it, the truth is, that the dance, as known at the present period, is essentially irreligious; irreligious in its immediate influence, and irreligious in it remote consequences. As such, I am bound, as a minister of righteousness, to warn as I now do, all who are exposed to its influence, of its evils and dangers. I know not how the

warning will be regarded *now*, but I am persuaded that when I meet you at the judgment, you will feel that in giving it utterance, I have only done my duty; and that any who may have heeded it, have in that, at least, consulted the safety of their immortal interests.

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